

Opening the doors to children with autism

Once the children are tucked in at night, the dishes dried and toys packed away, most parents grab a little downtime to unwind before bed, but not Fay Akhaven, writes **Denise Roberts**

Each evening, after Fay Akhaven says goodnight to her children, she switches on her computer and works into the night tackling paperwork, updating a website, and dealing with queries over a new school she has founded for children with autism.

It's been three and a half years and countless presentations, dinners, letters, talks, tears and whatever else it has taken to raise the funds – and this September the Snowflake School for Children with Autism, in Earls Court, London, will open its doors to its first intake of pupils aged five to 11.

The source of Fay's inspiration is her nine-year-old son Kamyar. He has autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Up to the age of five Kamyar went to a Montessori school but when it was time for him to start compulsory schooling the family could not find one to meet his needs.

'The nearest school that could meet Kamyar's needs had a long waiting list and so could not offer him a place,' says Fay. 'Those that could were over an hour's drive from where we live. I could not allow my child to go to just any school so I decided to educate him at home.'

Parents are desperate

This is a common problem for many children with autism and their parents, says Fay: 'I was recently contacted by the mother of an 18-year-old who attended many different schools over the years, none of which could really meet his needs. Consequently he regressed, and now no one can handle him. But that's the reality – if we don't give these children the help they need they will regress.'

Snowflake will help to meet the needs of many children like Kamyar, and there is plenty of demand. Without advertising it already has a waiting list: 'Parents are desperate,' says Fay

As the spectrum in autism is very wide each child's needs are different. Fay says no school could claim to meet the needs of every single child. Rather, they must begin by assessing a child's particular needs and from there find the most appropriate method to unlock their potential.

Remarkable achievements

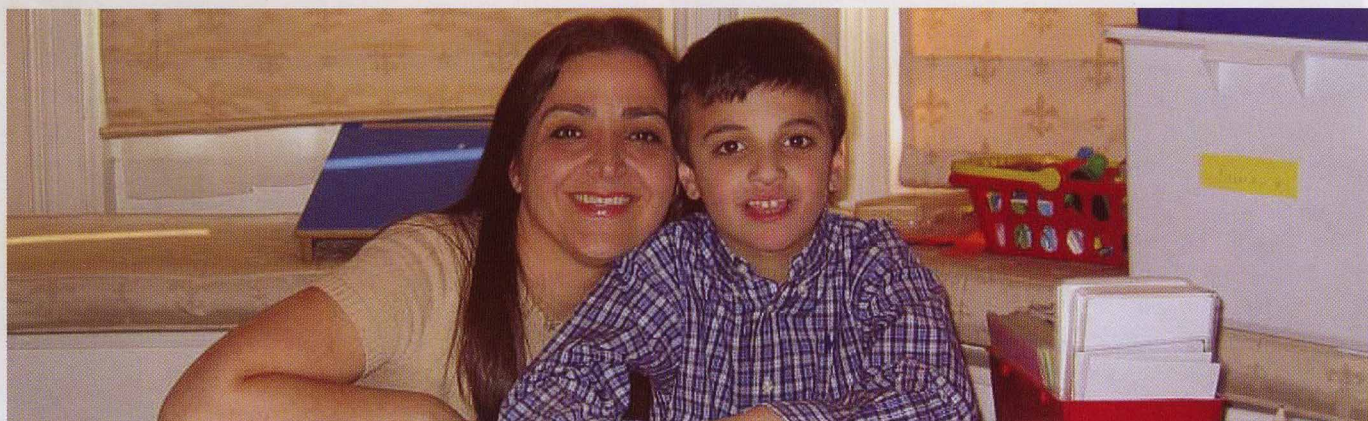
Many have benefited from a particular approach called Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA). It is a method where the curriculum is tailor-made to a child's exact level and learning needs with one-to-one adult support. Pupils' sensory and communication needs are addressed alongside the National Curriculum.

Snowflake will use the Verbal Behavioural (VB) approach, a specific form of ABA that helps a child to apply what he or she has learnt in a wider context.

Consultant headteacher Sue King is a specialist in autism who has been working with Fay to develop Snowflake's policies and curriculum. She says children with autism can be compared to the weather – turbulent, beautiful and often unpredictable.

'But I have personally witnessed some remarkable achievements by students whose disabilities were immensely challenging. The ability to tolerate wearing a hat in winter; to move from "nappies" to pants; to ask for a drink; to say his or her first words... these are all skills that people with this condition cannot just absorb through experience or cursory tuition.

'They find it very difficult to transfer knowledge but flourish when helped to overcome their individual challenges through direct teaching, constant repetition and the application of what is learnt in day-to-day situations. This is the benefit of a VB approach.'



The first signs

The opening of the school is a great achievement for Fay. She describes herself as a 'very private woman' and found Kamyar's condition very difficult to accept. Up until around the age of 15 months he was developing normally.

'I first noticed that he would repeatedly walk up and down the corridor or press the same songs on the CD player all day. He used to take all the pots and pans out of the kitchen cupboard and play with them, but now he was just opening and closing the doors without taking anything out. His baby babble was not progressing but if anything was getting less.'

Worried, Fay went to see her GP. Several times she was told nothing was wrong with Kamyar. When the child was two and still not speaking she went to see her health visitor who placed Kamyar on a waiting list for speech therapy.

'After two months of therapy nothing had changed and I was referred to a neurologist,' says Fay. 'By this time I was desperate for an answer so I just said, "Cut the crap and tell me what's wrong." He confirmed signs of autism – it was end of my world.

I cannot remember the rest of what the doctor said. On the way home I sat on a pavement and cried.'


Kamyar is speech impaired and his only means of communication was to sit on the floor and bang his head. But from that moment Fay decided to find out as much as she could about autism. She went to autism conferences and joined PEACH (Parents for the Early Intervention of Autism in Children) where she met other parents.

'It was at a PEACH conference in Birmingham that I learned how the VA approach has been used to help children with autism overcome behaviour, obsessions and challenges,' says Fay. 'And it was then I thought, "This is what my child needs".'

Fay says Kamyar has now learned over 600 signs and is progressing well. 'We communicate, haggle and argue like any other mother and son. He says he wants the car and I say we walk; sometimes he wins sometimes I win.'

'Recently a programme Kamyar enjoys came on television and he signed "Happy, happy". I cannot tell you how amazing that felt to me as a mother.'

See *my child* catalogue for SEN resources, or turn to page 42.

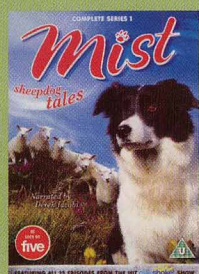
 Autism spectrum disorder, or an ASD, can range from low functioning autism to higher functioning Asperger syndrome, but all share three main areas of difficulty, with social communication, interaction and imagination.

FURTHER INFO

- National Autistic Society, nas.org.uk
- PEACH, peach.org.uk
- Snowflake School for Children with Autism, snowflakeschool.org.uk



Find more features about different types of special education needs at mychild.co.uk



IT'S A DOG'S LIFE – MIST: SHEEPDOG TALES

RELEASE – 14 APRIL, 2008

ANIMAL LOVERS can bring the sights, sounds and smells of the farmyard into their own living rooms when the enchanting adventures of Mist the Sheepdog and her canine colleagues on a

real-life, working farm are released on DVD from 14 April 2008 (Contender Entertainment, RRP £12.99).

Conceived by farmer and shepherd David Kennard and shot entirely on his farm on the

stunning North Devon coast, *Mist: Sheepdog Tales* takes us inside the minds of a group of feisty farm animals as they encounter the fun and perils of life on a working farm. Some of the UK's leading actors lend their voices to the series with Derek Jacobi narrating, Mel Giedroyc breathing life into Mist and Una Stubbs voicing Fern, Mist's difficult aunt.

The 13-part series wowed younger viewers on Five's Milkshake! last year and followed the success of the full-length feature *Mist: The Tale of a Sheepdog Puppy*, Five's highest rating tv film on Christmas Day 2006.

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COMPETITION